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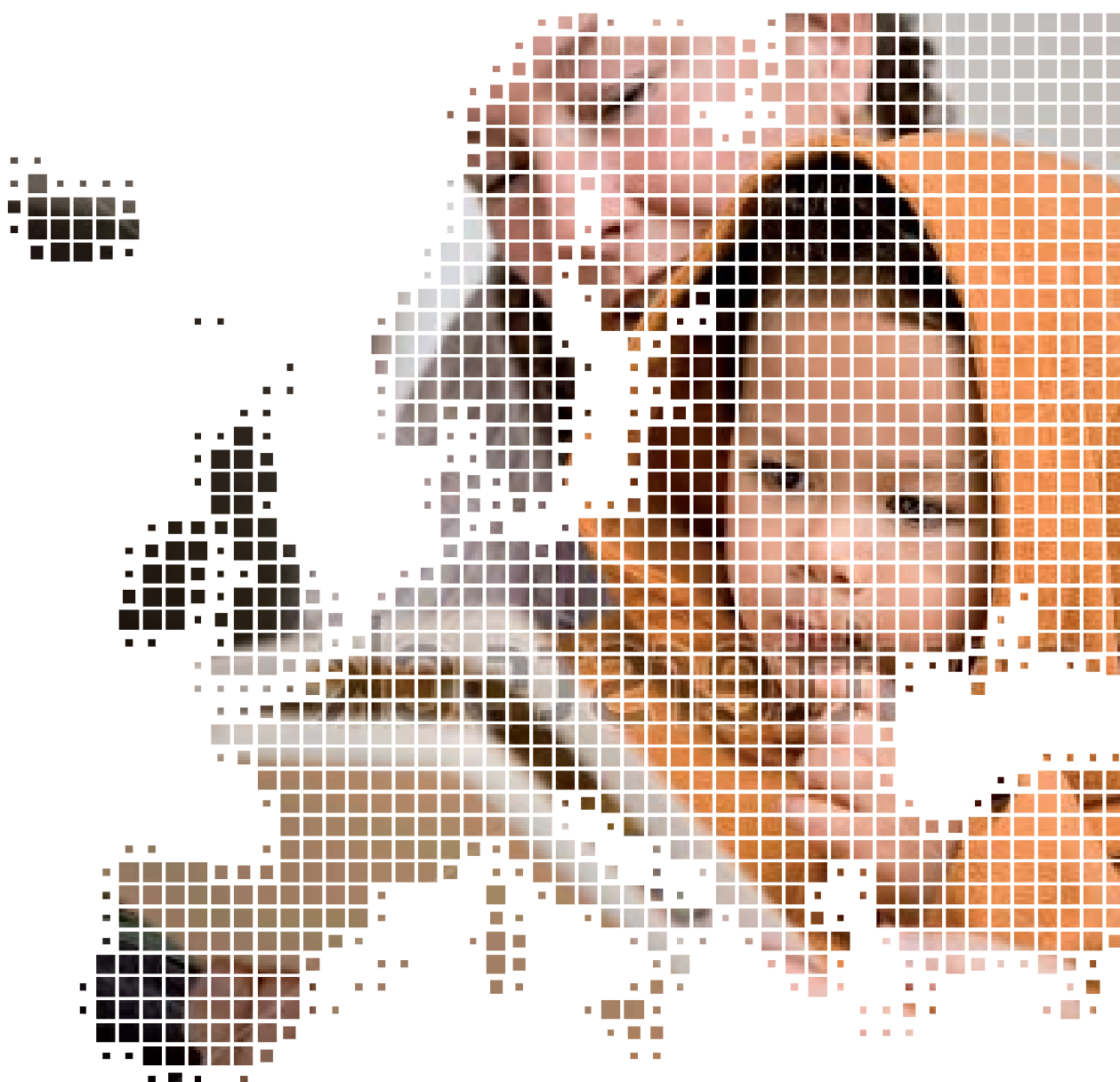
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Grandparenting in Europe:

family policy and grandparents' role in providing childcare



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Contents

Overview	1
Key Findings	2
Grandparent-headed households: three generation and skipped-generation households	4
Grandparent characteristics in 12 European countries	5
Grandparental care	8
Family policy and patterns of grandparenting	10
Findings from the multivariate analysis: grandparental characteristics associated with childcare	12
Conclusions	15
Bibliography	16

This study examines international data from European countries on grandparenting from SHARE (Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe), ELSA (the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing), censuses and other data sources in addition to mapping data on parental and grandparental policies for leave and flexible work, family support from the state in the form of childcare and family benefits, retirement and adult care policies, and labour market, childcare and family cultures and structures, to address the following questions:

1. How do the living arrangements of grandparents vary within and across European countries, and how have they changed over time?
2. How do the characteristics of grandparents vary across Europe in terms of age, living arrangements, socio-economic status, education, marital status, participation in paid work, retirement status and health?
3. How does the level of involvement of grandparents with their grandchildren vary across Europe in terms of contact, help and care? What characteristics of grandparents help to explain the diversity of arrangements?
4. How do family policies vary, and how are these variations in policy related to observed diversity in the levels of involvement of grandparents with their grandchildren?

Overview



Younger grandmothers who are fit, healthy and with younger grandchildren are the most likely to be providing care for their grandchildren, however they are also the very women who governments across Europe are aiming to encourage to stay in paid work for longer, in order to grow our economies and fund pensions, social care and other welfare provision in later life. Their vital but invisible role in providing childcare, whether intensive, regular or occasional, is likely to conflict with their ability to self-finance their old age, especially as widows' benefits in both state and employer pension schemes are eroded. The risk is an emerging care gap as older women remain in work longer, become less available to provide childcare and so adversely affect mothers' labour market participation.

Across Europe increased life expectancy means it is now quite common for a child to grow up while their grandparents and even great grandparents are alive. Grandparents have always provided financial, emotional and practical care and support to their children and grandchildren. However, this role has generally been taken for granted by families and governments, and grandparents have little recognition and few rights. Ageing populations, more mothers in the labour market and higher rates of divorce and relationship breakdown all indicate that the role grandparents play in family life is likely to become increasingly significant. In many countries austerity measures and cuts to public services are likely to lead to an expectation that grandparents will step in to fill care gaps for children and adults. Yet our understanding of grandparenting and how policy environments influence the role which grandparents play is limited. This research seeks to address this knowledge gap and inform debate on policy influencing the grandparental role.

Lower fertility and increased life expectancy mean that over the next two decades a fifth to a quarter of the population in many European countries will be aged over 65.¹ Population ageing is leading to increased emphasis on the health and wellbeing of older people, with an expectation that older men and women participate for longer in paid work. At the same time there is often an implicit assumption that older people will continue to play a vital caring role within their families. Grandparents are important providers of childcare, enabling mothers to enter or remain in paid work. They may also need to step in to take on the full-time role of raising grandchildren in difficult and distressing circumstances if parents are unable to do so, for example due to death, physical or mental health problems, drug or alcohol misuse, or imprisonment.

How far grandparents' informal caring roles can be combined with paid work is highly relevant for public policy, not only in relation to family and the labour market but also pensions and retirement, and for understanding inequalities across the life course. As we understand more about the role that grandparents play across Europe, we realise that it is important to implement social policies that help sustain these important, complex and potentially fragile social relationships.

¹ Commission of the European Communities 2005. Green paper, confronting demographic change: A new solidarity between the generations. Brussels.

Key findings



Across the European countries studied, grandparents who are younger, with higher educational levels, in better health, and whose youngest grandchild is under age six are more likely to provide childcare.

In countries with higher percentages of older women in paid work there is less involvement of grandmothers in intensive childcare.

Our study shows that across Europe grandparents, and grandmothers in particular, are playing a major role in providing both intensive and occasional care for their grandchildren. Over 40% of grandparents in the 11 European countries² studied provide grandchild care without the child's parents present, while in Britain the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey showed that 63% of grandparents with a grandchild under 16 do so.³

Younger grandmothers who are fit, healthy and with younger grandchildren – the most likely to be providing care for their grandchildren – are the very women who governments across Europe are aiming to encourage to stay in paid work for longer, in order to increase productivity and pay for their own pensions, health and social care in later life. Their vital but invisible role in providing childcare, whether intensive, regular and/or occasional, is likely to conflict with their own ability to self-finance their old age, especially as widow's benefits in both state and employer pension schemes are eroded.

England and Wales, like the U.S., has experienced an increase in the prevalence of skipped-generation households – households consisting of grandparents and grandchildren but without the parents. This rose from 0.25% of adults aged 35 and over living in such households in 1981 to 0.42% in 2001. These households are likely to experience poverty and disadvantage. No other European country studied so far follows this pattern.

Our study shows considerable variations in the characteristics of grandparents across the European countries studied. English grandparents are relatively young, more likely to be in paid work and have more grandchildren on average than grandparents in the remaining 11 European countries. In England one in four (23%) grandparents aged 50 and over are in paid work, compared with an average of just one in seven across the other 11 countries studied. Only Denmark and Sweden have a higher percentage of working grandparents.

While overall grandparents in the European countries studied provide high levels of childcare, there are striking variations in the intensity and frequency of the care provided. In France, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands between 50% and 60% of grandparents provide some childcare compared with just 40% in the Southern European countries. However, regular and intensive grandchild care is more common in Southern Europe, with 20% of grandparents in Italy providing almost daily childcare compared with just 2% of grandparents in the Netherlands.

Across the European countries studied, grandparents who are younger, with higher educational levels, in better health, and whose youngest grandchild is under age six are more likely to provide childcare.

Differences in the characteristics of grandparents in the different countries (such as age and marital status) explain some of the differences in grandparental childcare across the 12 European countries.

However, there are significant differences between countries too. The research finds that different family policy contexts are associated with varying patterns of grandchild care.

² The 11 SHARE countries are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

³ Wellard, S. 2011. *Doing it all? Grandparents, childcare and employment: An analysis of British Social Attitudes Survey Data from 1998 and 2009*. London: Grandparents Plus.

In countries such as Sweden and Denmark (and to a lesser extent, France), parents are expected to work full time, formal childcare is widely available, and there is generous maternity pay and support for mothers who stay home. In these countries grandmothers play a far more limited role in providing intensive childcare, but are still significantly involved in providing occasional and less intensive care for grandchildren.

In Portugal, Spain, Italy and Romania, where welfare payments to parents and mothers at home are limited and there is little formal childcare and few opportunities for mothers to work part-time, grandparents provide a great deal of intensive childcare for their grandchildren. Moreover, in these countries, mothers who do work often do so for 40 plus hours a week, and since there is little affordable formal childcare, there is greater reliance on intensive care by grandmothers. With the exception of Romania, in these countries there is less of a role for grandparents providing occasional or less intensive care without the parents present.

In the UK, Germany and the Netherlands, public support for families is varied but less universal, and childcare coverage is patchy and often provided by the market rather than the state, and the norm is that women work part-time. Here, grandparents generally play a middling role in both intensive childcare and occasional/less intensive childcare. In these countries, a smaller proportion of those mothers in full-time work do so for long hours, leading to less reliance on intensive childcare by grandmothers. In the Netherlands, which has by far the highest proportion of mothers working part-time and very few mothers working full-time, and where formal childcare is widespread, there is very little intensive childcare by grandparents.

In general, countries with the lowest usage of formal childcare, Hungary, Portugal and Romania, have the highest percentages of grandmothers caring intensively for their grandchildren, and countries with the highest usage, Sweden and Denmark, have the lowest percentages of grandmothers providing intensive childcare.

In countries with higher percentages of older women in paid work there is less involvement of grandmothers in intensive childcare.

Given that grandmothers aged 50 to 69 who are not in paid work are the most likely to provide childcare, the plans of European governments to extend retirement ages and increase female labour force participation at older ages are likely to conflict with grandparents' role in providing childcare. This will have significant implications for labour market participation by younger mothers, and for pension acquisition and the financial security of mid-life women.

Grandparent-headed households: three generation and skipped generation households



In England and Wales, France and West Germany there has been a decline in the percentage of adults aged 35 plus living in three generation households.

In England and Wales, like the US, there has been an increase in skipped generation households, from 0.25% of adults over 35 living in such households in 1981 to 0.42% in 2001.

The study looks at trends over time in the prevalence of adults living in grandparent households (both three generation and households with the parents' generation absent) in England and Wales, France, West Germany, Romania and Portugal.

In England and Wales, France and West Germany there has been a decline in the percentage of adults aged 35 plus living in three generation households. In England this declined from 3.3% in 1981 to 1.5% in 2001, the latest period for which data is available. In Romania, and also the US, there has been an increase over the same time frame.

In England and Wales, like the US, there has been an increase in skipped generation households, from 0.25% of adults over 35 living in such households in 1981 to 0.42% in 2001. This most likely reflects the increase in kinship care (wider family members raising children) identified by Nandy and Selwyn's analysis of Census microdata.⁴

Both three generation and skipped generation grandparent households are associated with poverty and socio economic disadvantage in all the countries studied.

Adults living in grandparent households are more likely to be women, divorced, widowed or separated, with lower educational levels, and economically inactive, and this is particularly marked for those in skipped generation grandparent households.

⁴ Nandy, S., Selwyn, J., Farmer, E. and Vaisey, P. (2011) Spotlight on kinship care: *Using Census microdata to examine the extent and nature of kinship care in the U.K.*, London: University of Bristol.

Grandparent characteristics in 12 European countries



Overall the highest percentage of older adults who are grandparents are in Scandinavia and Belgium, followed by England and France, and the lowest are in Southern Europe.

In all countries the majority of grandparents are women

The study looks at the characteristics of grandparents aged 50 and over from the following countries:

- England and France
- Denmark and Sweden (Scandinavia)
- Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland (Western Europe)
- Spain, Italy and Greece (Southern Europe)

Percentage of older adults who are grandparents

In all 12⁵ European countries studied, the majority of women over 50 are grandmothers, ranging from 72% in Denmark to 53% in Switzerland. In most countries the majority of men over 50 are grandfathers, ranging from 62% in Belgium to 42% in Greece. In England 67% of women over 50 are grandmothers and 58% of men over 50 are grandfathers.

Overall the highest percentage of older adults who are grandparents are in Scandinavia and Belgium, followed by England and France, and the lowest are in Southern Europe. Higher rates of grandparents in Scandinavia and Belgium are likely to reflect both higher fertility among adult children and younger ages at childbearing.

Age, gender and marital status of grandparents

The youngest grandparents are in Denmark (mean age 67) and the oldest are in Greece (mean age 70). The highest percentage of working aged grandparents (50 to 64) are in Scandinavia, with Denmark at 50%. The lowest percentages are in Southern Europe, with around a third aged 50 to 64 in Spain and Italy. The percentage of working-aged grandparents is relatively high in England (41%).

Table 1 Mean age of grandmothers and grandfathers by country

	EN	FR	DK	SE	DE	NL	BE	AT	CH	ES	IT	GR
Grandfathers	67.5	67	66.1	67.4	67.7	67.2	67.5	66	68.7	69.5	69.3	71.1
Grandmothers	68.3	68.2	66.8	68.4	68.2	67.9	68.8	67.8	69.8	69.6	69.4	69.6
Grandparents	67.9	67.8	66.5	68	68.3	67.6	68.3	67.1	69.4	69.5	69.3	70.2

Source: SHARE, 2004/05; ELSA, 2002/03; own calculations. Weighted data for mean values.

In all countries the majority of grandparents are women, ranging from 56% in Sweden and 57% in England to 61% in Greece.

Marital status as well as age and gender is likely to be a factor in whether grandparents provide childcare. The highest percentage of still married grandparents are in the Netherlands, at 70%, with 69% in England. Grandmothers are more than likely than grandfathers to be widowed in all countries.

⁵ 11 SHARE countries plus England

English grandparents have the most grandchildren – an average of 4.9 compared with 4.2 across the other countries studied.

Only in Sweden do grandmothers report higher levels of education than grandfathers.

Almost one in four (23%) of English grandparents are in paid work, compared with the average across the 11 countries in SHARE of one in seven.

Children and grandchildren

Even though in the Netherlands and Spain, grandparents have more children (a mean of almost 3.0) compared with 2.7 in England, English grandparents have the most grandchildren – an average of 4.9 compared with 4.2 across the other countries studied. The lowest numbers of grandchildren are in Germany and Austria (3.7) and Greece (3.8). English grandmothers have on average 5.2 grandchildren, and English grandfathers have 4.6 grandchildren, more than in any other country.

Grandparental involvement in children's lives is likely to depend on the number of grandchildren, and also their age. Among the European countries studied, over half of grandparents have at least one grandchild under the age of six. In the Netherlands, 40% of grandparents have a grandchild under age three, compared with just 18% in Austria.

Sandwich generation grandparents

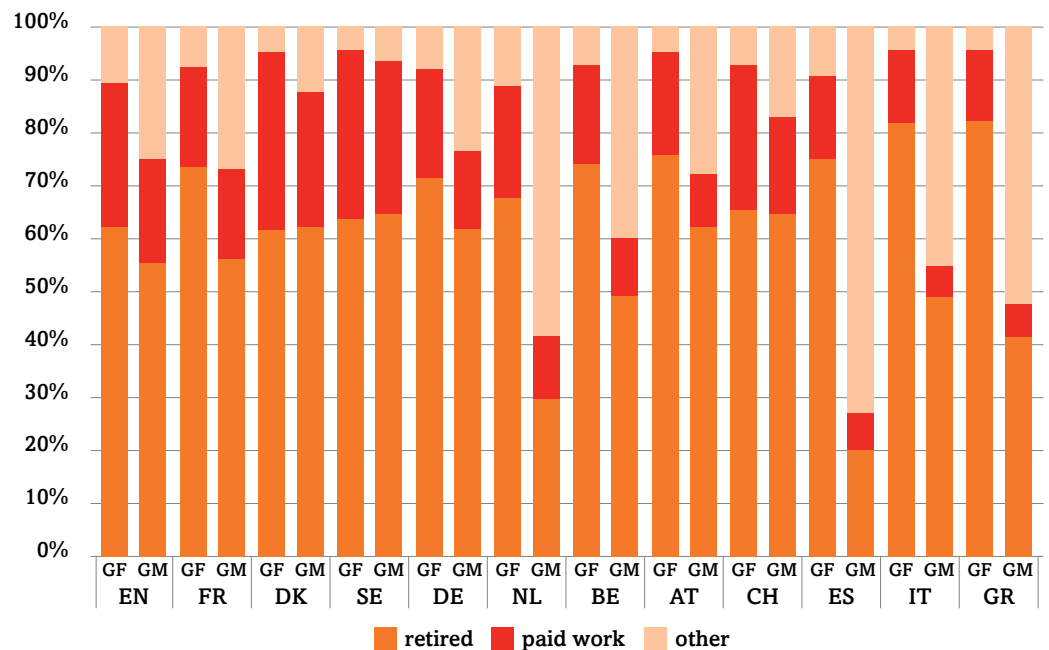
Grandparents in the Scandinavian countries and France show the highest percentages who are in the sandwich generation with at least one of their own parents still alive, at around 22%. The lowest is in Italy (12%). Relatively fewer grandparents in England are in the sandwich generation (15%). Our analysis includes all grandparents, not just those with grandchildren under the age of 16. Among these grandparents, as the BSA survey analysis shows, the percentage of grandparents with their own parents is much higher at 28%.³

Education, economic activity and wealth

There is a wide range of educational levels across Europe, with over 80% of grandparents reporting a low educational level in Southern European countries compared with just 25% in Germany. On average across the 11 countries in SHARE, 59% report a low educational level (56% in England), 28% a middle level (28% in England) and 13% a high educational level (16% in England).

Only in Sweden do grandmothers report higher levels of education than grandfathers. There is also wide variation in the percentage of grandparents in paid work, from 29% in the Scandinavian countries to 9% in Italy. Almost one in four (23%) of English grandparents are in paid work, compared with the average across the 11 countries in SHARE of one in seven.

Figure 1 Economic status of grandparents, by gender and country



Source: SHARE, 2004/05; ELSA, 2002/03; own calculations. Weighted Data

Across Europe grandmothers are poorer than grandfathers

English grandparents, along with those from Denmark, are least likely to report four or more depressive symptoms

English grandparents have the highest levels of health or disability-related limitation in activities in daily living across the study

Across Europe grandmothers are poorer than grandfathers, in part reflecting the fact that grandmothers tend to be older and are more likely to be widowed than grandfathers. The percentage of grandmothers who are in the poorest 20% of the wealth distribution for people over 50 ranges from 23% in Denmark to 32% in Germany, while for grandfathers those in the poorest 20% ranges from 16% in France to 24% in Italy.

Health and wellbeing

There is a wide range in the percentage of grandparents across the countries studied reporting their health as fair or poor, from just 12% of grandfathers and 16% of grandmothers in Sweden, to 45% of grandfathers and 48% of grandmothers in Germany. English grandparents rate their health better in comparison to the average across the 11 countries in SHARE, with 31% of grandfathers rating their health as fair or poor compared with the average of 38%. 30% of English grandmothers rate their health as fair or poor compared with the average of 44%.

English grandparents, along with those from Denmark, are least likely to report four or more depressive symptoms (18%) while Spanish, French and Italian grandmothers report particularly high levels (over 40%).

However, with almost one in four reporting one or more limitation, compared with 12% of grandmothers and 14% of grandfathers elsewhere.

Grandparents across Europe tend to have poorer rates of cognitive function than over 50s who are not grandparents, reflecting the fact that they tend to be older. After taking age into account, differences between countries in grandparents' cognitive function are small.

Grandparental Care

The research shows a high level of grandparental involvement in childcare across Europe. 44% of grandparents in the SHARE countries have looked after a grandchild without the presence of the parents in the last 12 months.

the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey shows that 63% of grandparents with grandchildren under 16 reported that they had ever looked after a grandchild in the last 12 months,³

11% of grandparents across the 11 countries in SHARE provided daily or almost daily care

The research shows a high level of grandparental involvement in childcare across Europe. 44% of grandparents in the SHARE countries have looked after a grandchild without the presence of the parents in the last 12 months. The highest incidence of grandparents providing any childcare is in the Netherlands and Denmark, with around 57% of grandparents looking after a grandchild in the past 12 months, and the lowest rates are in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Southern European countries, at around 40%.

In Britain, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey shows that 63% of grandparents with grandchildren under 16 reported that they had ever looked after a grandchild in the last 12 months,³ compared with 50% elsewhere in Europe who had provided some type of care for a grandchild under 16 without the parents present.⁶

11% of grandparents across the 11 countries in SHARE provided daily or almost daily care, ranging from 20% in Italy and Greece to 2% or lower in the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands.

The BSA survey shows that 19% of grandmothers and 14% of grandfathers in Britain with grandchildren under 16 reported providing 10 hours a week or more of childcare for one or more of their grandchildren.³ 6% of all grandparents in Britain with a grandchild of any age looked after a grandchild in the past week, averaging 30 hours a week.

Table 2 Percentages of grandmothers providing care for grandchildren

	Percentage of grandmothers providing any care for grandchildren	Percentage of grandmothers providing intensive care for grandchildren
Sweden	51	2
the Netherlands	57	2
Denmark	59	2
France	51	7
Germany	40	8
UK	63 ^a	8 ^b
Hungary	56 ^c	13 ^c
Portugal	-	14 ^d
Spain	42	17
Italy	42	22
Romania	93 ^c	30 ^c

Source: Data from SHARE, BSAS^a, ELSA^b (England), GGS^c [Romania, Hungary],^d ESS Portugal] BSAS figure is for grandparents with grandchildren under 16.

⁶ Hank, K. & Buber, I. 2009. Grandparents caring for their grandchildren findings from the 2004 Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30, 53-73.

The analysis found that grandparents providing childcare are likely to be female, younger, with a partner, with a higher educational level and in higher wealth quintiles, and with better health and younger grandchildren.

Who are the grandparents providing childcare?

The analysis found that grandparents providing childcare are likely to be female, younger, with a partner, with a higher educational level and in higher wealth quintiles, and with better health and younger grandchildren. Overall, grandchild care is associated with socio economic advantage and being younger.

Which parents are more likely to receive childcare from a grandparent?

Parents⁷ in northern European countries are more likely to have a child looked after by grandparents than those in Austria, Switzerland and southern European countries.

However, for regular childcare the situation is the reverse: parents⁷ in Scandinavian countries are least likely to have their children regularly looked after by grandparents, while parents⁷ in Italy, Greece and Belgium are most likely to have children looked after regularly.

Mothers,⁷ especially those who have never been married, are more likely to have a child looked after by grandparents. The younger the parent⁷ the more likely it is that their child is looked after regularly by grandparents.

Parents⁷ whose youngest child is under six are more likely to have a child looked after by a grandparent. Overall, 55% of parents⁷ whose youngest child is aged between nought and two receive grandparent care for their children, 59% of those whose youngest child is aged three to five, and 48% of those whose youngest child is aged six to 11. Only 11% of parents⁷ whose child is aged 12 or older receive grandparent childcare. Parents⁷ who live closer to grandparents are more likely to have their child looked after by a grandparent. 38% of parents⁷ who live within five kilometres of a child's grandparent received grandparent childcare, compared with 20% of those who live more than 100 km away.

Overall a higher percentage of mothers⁷ who work part-time have a child looked after by a grandparent than those who work full-time. However the pattern varies across countries.

For mothers,⁷ overall a higher percentage of those in paid work receive grandparental childcare compared with those who are not in paid work, however the reverse is true for mothers⁷ in Scandinavia where those who are not in paid work receive more help from grandparents than those who are.

⁷ Please note that we do not have a representative sample of parents in SHARE. What we do have are the selected characteristics of up to 4 adult children given to us by the older person. We know which of the up to adult children the older person identifies as being a parent and we also know whether these parents have been identified (that is by their older mother or father) as being given grandchildcare.

Family policy and patterns of grandparenting



The report considers the extent to which differences in the ways that grandparents care for grandchildren across Europe might be accounted for by differences in family and childcare policy, as well as related work and childcare settings and cultural attitudes. Countries differ markedly in the extent to which women and mothers participate in paid labour and the extent to which people have access to and use formal childcare. Cultural factors also shape different preferences and norms for childcare, with variation across Europe in beliefs about what is best for families and children.

This element of the research focuses on care by grandmothers, since grandfathers rarely provide childcare in the absence of parents without grandmothers present. Outcomes are examined in eleven countries, selected for this analysis to provide clear examples of countries with different policy environments, labour market and childcare structures and varying family, care and work cultures: Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.



Across Europe there is increased participation in the labour market by women and mothers, with all countries providing some support for leave from paid work and childcare. Nevertheless, significant gender differences remain. Unstable and inflexible labour markets, and underfunded or fragmented childcare, push mothers to find alternative forms of care, or to leave paid work or work fewer hours in order to care for their children.

We have developed a framework for cross-country data analysis to examine the relationships between family and care policy and outcomes, labour market structures and participation (especially of mothers), and family and gender cultures. The objective is to analyse political, cultural and employment settings in different countries that help explain the level and intensity of grandmaternal childcare. Across the three spheres of 'policies', 'labour markets' and 'family and gender cultures' we explored a raft of approximately 250 indicators for each of the eleven countries on all kinds of parental and non parental leave, cash benefits, childcare and elder care and retirement policies, as well as data on female labour market participation and attitudinal data. We classify policies according to the extent to which the state encourages or assumes a role for grandparents. We used a qualitative constant comparative method suggested by existing theoretical understanding of family policy and labour markets to examine which variables (indicators) were associated with each other and how, and how these associations and interactions varied between countries. We then used this analysis to cluster our countries according to similarities and differences between them on these indicators, and in the ways that these indicators were associated with each other. We then considered these clusters in detail, narrowing down our variables to those that seemed most important in explaining how and why grandparental care varied from country to country.

Findings from the policy analysis

Our analysis indicates that there is a close relationship between the family and care policy context and the likelihood that grandmothers are providing intensive childcare. In terms of constellations of policies, we found that our countries clustered into three groups. In the first group, exemplified by Sweden and Denmark, the Scandinavian countries, and to a lesser extent, France, the State organises and provides childcare, *there is no assumption that grandparents will provide care*, and all transfers and benefits are available only for parents. In these countries where both parents expect to work full-time, formal childcare is well-provided and there are good maternal benefits, fewer grandmothers provide intensive childcare.

In the second group, there is an *assumption that grandparents will provide care* – the Southern and Eastern European countries studied fall into this group. In Hungary, Portugal and Spain, this assumption is explicit, but Italy and Romania are also considered part of this group since policy vacuums leave a childcare gap that in practice can only be filled by grandparents – the assumption they will provide care is implicit. In these countries there are few part-time jobs, limited formal childcare and only limited in-kind family benefits, and more grandmothers provide intensive childcare.

In a third group of countries, public support is varied but less universal, childcare coverage is patchy and provided more by the market than the state, and women are more likely to work part-time. Here grandparents have a middling role in both intensive childcare and occasional/less intensive childcare. The UK, Germany and the Netherlands are examples of these countries, although the Netherlands, for the reasons given below, has very low percentages of grandmothers providing intensive childcare.

The family and care policy environments are however only one part of the picture. The pattern of female labour force participation in a country is associated with childcare by grandmothers, independently of the policy context. Long working hours for mothers and little formal childcare mean more grandmothers providing intensive childcare. In countries where a high percentage of mothers with young children do not work, those mothers who do work are particularly reliant on intensive grandmother care. Also, lower labour force participation among women aged 50 to 64 is associated with more intensive grandmother care.

Use of formal childcare for young children is inversely related to intensive childcare by grandmothers. Furthermore, in those countries where maternal care for pre-school children is the preferred norm, childcare patterns suggest that grandmothers are regarded as the best care substitute for those mothers who work in the paid labour market.

Finding from the multivariate analysis:

Grandparental characteristics associated with childcare



We used a wide variety of multivariate techniques as appropriate to investigate which individual and country level characteristics are related to grandchild care. Such analyses have several advantages. They permit us to explore the relationship of each characteristic in relation to grandchild care while taking into account the potentially confounding influence of other characteristics. For example, in our descriptive analyses we found significant differences in the percentage of grandparents in paid work across countries. Such differences may help to explain variations in grandchild care. However, we also know that this is confounded with age, that is an older grandparent is less likely to be in paid work. Thus we need to know whether it is being in paid work or age (or both) that is driving the relationship to grandchild care. Our presentation of analyses in the following sections considers these questions with respect to all of the characteristics discussed so far.

Intensive, non-intensive and no childcare provision

First, we present our findings for the three types of grandchild care simultaneously, that is intensive grandchild care, non-intensive grandchild care, and no grandchild care.⁸ This is because we want to understand the relative importance of grandparent characteristics for each level of care and how they relate to each other. We used a generalised ordinal logit model (in our case with partial proportional odds).

Multivariate analysis shows that grandparents most likely to provide any (intensive and non-intensive) childcare are female, young, married, retired, and in the higher wealth quintiles. Married grandparents are more than one and half times as likely to provide any childcare as unmarried (i.e. never-married, widowed or divorced) grandparents. Grandparents with lower levels of education are significantly less likely to provide any childcare; however, they are more likely than those with high educational levels to provide intensive childcare.

Grandparents with several grandchildren are significantly more likely to provide any childcare than those with just one grandchild, but having more than one grandchild is not significantly associated with providing intensive childcare. Grandparents with a youngest grandchild between the ages of three and five (in comparison to ages one to two) are the most likely to be providing any childcare. Grandparents whose youngest grandchild is aged over six are significantly less likely to be providing care in comparison to grandparents with a youngest grandchild between ages one and two.

Grandparents with better cognitive function are more likely to provide any type of childcare, but the effect is greater for more intensive care. A similar pattern is found when severity of health or disability related functional limitations are considered.

⁸ England/Britain is excluded from this analysis due to a lack of comparable data.

Policy contexts

We used our model to examine whether different policy environments still retain some explanatory power once we have taken into account the extent to which the personal characteristics of grandparents differ across countries. Multivariate analysis shows that even when we account for the widely varying characteristics of grandparents across Europe, different national policy contexts are still associated with different levels of grandparent childcare. For example, Danish and Swedish grandparents (which fall into our category of countries where *no grandparental care is assumed* by the policy context) are significantly more likely to provide some childcare but significantly less likely to provide intensive childcare than those countries with more *neutral* policy regimes towards grandparental care such as Germany.

Grandparents in countries that fall into our category of having policy contexts that *assume grandparental care*, (e.g. Spain, Italy and Greece) are less likely to provide some grandparent childcare but more likely to provide intensive grandparent care than countries with more neutral policy regimes like Germany.

Grandparents in the countries where the policy context is relatively *neutral* toward grandparents, (i.e. Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Belgium) fall into a middle group when considering the provision of intensive childcare – providing more than in the Scandinavian countries but less likely to provide intensive care than those countries where policy *assumes* a grandparental role. In the provision of any care, there is a much more even picture across all the countries studied, with grandparents quite similar across the SHARE countries in providing at least some care for their grandchildren. However, this analysis does show that Germany and Austria are similar to Italy and Spain, with a lower likelihood that grandparents will provide some care, while grandparents in the Netherlands and Belgium have the highest likelihood of grandparents helping out with care at least some of the time.

Grandmothers are one and a half times more likely to provide intensive childcare than grandfathers. Younger grandparents, and those who are married or cohabiting are also more likely to be providing intensive childcare.

Grandparents without health or disability related limitations are almost twice as likely as those with such conditions to be providing intensive childcare.

Intensive childcare provision

Multivariate logistic regression analysis was conducted to explore which grandparental characteristics are associated with intensive grandparental care – i.e. daily or at least 30 hours a week of care. Characteristics considered were gender, age, marital, employment and health status and number of grandchildren.

Grandmothers are one and a half times more likely to provide intensive childcare than grandfathers. Younger grandparents, and those who are married or cohabiting are also more likely to be providing intensive childcare.

Grandparents with lower educational levels and retired grandparents are more likely to provide intensive childcare. Retired grandparents are one and a half times more likely to provide intensive childcare than those grandparents in paid work (even taking age into account). Wealth and number of grandchildren are not significantly associated with providing intensive childcare.

Among the various health indicators considered, functional limitations and cognitive function are significantly (and negatively) associated with the provision of intensive grandchild care. Grandparents without health or disability related limitations are almost twice as likely as those with such conditions to be providing intensive childcare. However there is no significant relationship between self-rated health and providing intensive childcare.



Our policy context classifications help us to a large extent to understand the hierarchy of countries when considering the extent to which grandparents provide intensive childcare for their grandchildren, even after taking account of other differences in grandparents' characteristics across countries. Grandparents in Sweden and Denmark (in our classification of countries where policies *assume no grandparental care*), for example, were only around half as likely as grandparents in England to provide intensive childcare. The Netherlands, England, Switzerland, and France are quite similar to each other in the provision of intensive care, with the likelihood of grandparents providing intensive childcare about twice as high in Germany, Austria and Belgium than in England. These middle countries, with the exception of France, are all classified into our middle group of *neutral* countries. Spain, Italy and Greece stand out however as having much higher likelihood of grandparents providing intensive care – three to five times higher than in England, countries where policies *assume grandparental care*.

Multilevel analyses taking country indicators into account

So far, analyses above considered the different policy contexts and their relationship to different levels of grandparent care. In this model we examined whether it is the policy context or the cultural and institutional factors which these contexts produce and reflect that has more explanatory power in explaining variation in grandparental childcare, again taking into account the variation in individual characteristics of grandparents across Europe. We find that considering the policy context groupings does get us a long way in understanding grandparental care, but we can explain even more of the variation when we look at the extent to which differences in the cultural-contextual factors across European countries are related to grandparent childcare (while still taking grandparent characteristics into account). We use multilevel logistic regression models to look at intensive grandparent care taking four key country-level variables into account: the percentage of mothers aged 25-49 who are not in paid employment and the percentage of women aged 50-64 in paid work, capturing the two-generation structure of the labour market; the percentage of individuals who strongly agree with the statement that “pre-school children suffer with a working mother” capturing societal attitudes towards care and gender; finally, the percentage of children under the age of three who are enrolled in formal childcare, used as an indicator of the use of formal childcare.

These models show that policies and cultural-structural factors all shape the extent to which grandparents provide intensive childcare in European countries. In particular, certain country characteristics seem to provide arrangements in which grandparents are more likely to engage intensively in providing intensive childcare, even when all the variation in grandparents' characteristics is taken into account. The extent to which mothers in a country are not in the paid labour force is associated with the degree of policy focus on providing formal, affordable childcare, particularly for very young children. Similarly, in countries where mothers are expected to stay at home to care for their families there is also a belief that pre-school children would suffer with working mothers. In such ‘pro family care’ countries, opportunities for young mothers (aged 25 to 49) to work flexible hours also tend to be limited; mothers who do work in countries where the normative expectation is to stay at home to care for their families tend to work full-time. Hence, mothers who work in such countries need the co-operation of grandparents, and grandmothers in particular. However, the availability of grandmothers to offer such help is reduced in countries where employment rates for women 50 to 64 are comparably high.

Our analysis indicates that across Europe grandparents are playing a major role in providing childcare for grandchildren.

Conclusions



We have found that in countries where formal childcare is limited and benefits for families and stay at home mothers are not generous, grandparents are providing intensive levels of childcare. In Italy and Greece, for example, almost a quarter of grandparents look after their grandchildren without the parents there for around 30 hours a week, and more than one in five grandmothers is providing almost daily care. In these countries there are fewer opportunities for mothers to work part-time, and those mothers who are in work tend to work full-time.

On the other hand in countries where there is extensive provision of formal childcare, generous maternity and family benefits and support for stay at home mothers, grandparents are much less likely to be providing intensive childcare, but much more likely to be providing occasional care without the parents present.

In France, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands up to 60% of grandparents provide some childcare, and in Britain the figure is 63% for those with a grandchild under 16. In these countries mothers are much more likely to be working, and grandparents are acting as a 'reserve army' of care. In many instances grandparents are likely to be providing care to support working mothers, for example during school holidays and when children are ill and in other family emergencies, or providing less intensive regular childcare to complement formal childcare.

Across all countries our analysis shows that grandparents who provide childcare tend to be younger, healthier, married and to have higher educational levels, and also to classify themselves as retired. These are the very women who governments across Europe are seeking to keep longer in the labour market to grow our economies in response to ageing populations, with fewer younger workers entering the labour market and increased life expectancy. This conflict between grandmothers' role in providing childcare and increased participation in paid work both to protect their own retirement incomes and increase productivity has major implications for the future paid employment of mothers of young children, as well as for their own financial security in later life.

As our populations age the role of grandparents in family life is likely to become even more significant. Already, 17% of grandparents across Europe are in the sandwich generation, with their own parents still alive. As life expectancy increases further, this percentage is likely to increase. Younger grandparents, who are most likely to have younger children and grandchildren, are of course more likely to still have a parent alive. In Britain, 28% of grandparents with a grandchild under 16 have a parent still alive, six in 10 are still working and nearly eight in 10 are providing some care for grandchildren.³ This group of grandparents is already under pressure to provide work and care up and down the generations. Austerity programmes leading to cuts in provision for both eldercare and childcare risk putting yet more pressure on these younger grandparents. Policymakers need to consider the implications for the future financial security of this mid-life generation, as well as the implications of work, care and retirement policies for those in mid-life on younger working parents.

When we consider the experiences of other countries in Europe, it is clear that the UK faces a stark choice. We can either prioritise grandmothers remaining in the labour market for longer, supporting their own retirement, but acknowledge over time this is likely to create a care gap for working parents, largely impacting on mothers' employment; or we can invest in universal, affordable formal childcare which will meet, at least in part, that emerging childcare gap and retain both older women and working mothers in the labour market. A third, and arguably the least attractive option would be to decide to reverse the trend for working longer and rely heavily on our ageing population to provide the childcare. Doing so would create an even bigger pensions and care funding gap for older generations and would quickly prove to be unsustainable.

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